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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ELECTION CAMPAIGNS OF  
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On December 11, the Central Election Commission (CEC) released the final list of the seven registered candidates for the January 5 pre-term presidential elections. Several candidates, however, have been actively campaigning for as long as a week, meeting daily with Tbilisi residents and travelling to the regions to gain votes. Most campaign promises address pressing social issues but few candidates have laid out concrete plans on how to implement their programs. The ordinary voter may find it difficult to differentiate between each party's platforms, but there are differences among the campaign strategies. Saakashvili's campaign strategy, with the strongest political machine behind it, has been the most effective at communicating the National Movement platform and emphasizing past party successes. On the other hand, United National Council of opposition (UNC) candidate Levan Gachechiladze's campaign has primarily focused on attacking the National Movement instead of developing a platform of constructive ideas that appeal widely to the Georgian people. End Summary.

2.(U) A snap-shot of Mikheil Saakashvili (National Movement), Levan Gachechiladze (United National Council of opposition), Davit Gamkrelidze (New Rightists), Shalva Natelashvili (Labor Party), and Gia Maisashvili's (Party for Future) campaigns are outlined below. Badri Patarkatsishvili and Irina Sarishvili (Party of Hope) have not launched their campaigns yet.

Mikheil Saakashvili, National Movement  
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¶3. (SBU) Mikheil Saakashvili has focused on the number five, his assigned number as a candidate, which he notes is an "excellent" grade in Georgian schools and the date of the election falling on the fifth of January. Saakashvili's campaign is displaying the number 5 against a red-and-white background, evoking the Georgian flag which was established by the National Movement after the Rose Revolution. To bring his point home, Saakashvili has even taken to wearing a red turtleneck during his campaign appearances.

4.(SBU) Saakashvili's latest campaign slogan is "Georgia without poverty." In recent public appearances, Saakashvili has stressed that, if elected, poverty will be eradicated throughout Georgia. In one speech, Saakashvili said "I want to get the votes of the people who live in the most dire conditions. I want to represent the most vulnerable." This laconic slogan is being reinforced by numerous new government initiatives which the government claims were in the works before the announcement of the pre-term presidential elections, although there were not budgetary allocations for them at the time the election was called. These social programs are designed to improve the social conditions of pensioners, teachers, internally displaced people (IDPs), and small business owners.

Saakashvili's response to charges he should have begun these social programs before the election (or even before the November protests) has been to point out that the government was busy building roads, providing a steady supply of electricity, and fighting criminals and corruption. He defended his timing by saying "jobs cannot be created without building a state." Saakashvili's public speeches are often attended by prominent members of government (and members of his party) such as the Mayor of Tbilisi and the Minister of Refugees, whose presence lends credibility to his campaign promises. Though the government officials can legally participate in Saakashvili's campaign events, the opposition has strongly objected to their participation as bad form.

¶5. (SBU) Saakashvili's new focus on poverty also resonates with prior campaign slogans---"Georgia without Shevardnadze," "Georgia without Abashidze," "Georgia without power shortages," and "Georgia without criminals.Q Saakashvili has effectively used these slogans to remind the voter of the government's successes. Saakashvili often uses schools, sports grounds, and industrial facilities as the venues for his widely televised public appearances, where he emphasizes school renovations, new soccer fields, and the conclusion of the agreement on the new Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku railway project Q some of the most visible Qsuccess storiesQ of his administration. These venues often are staged with large television screens and large crowds.

¶6. (SBU) One of the strongest aspects of Saakashvili's campaign is his outreach to Georgia's ethnic minorities. On the day of the UNM party congress, Saakashvili said "If there is a need, I will

be Armenian; if there is a need, I will be Azeri; if there is a need I will be Ossetian." This week Saakashvili addressed huge crowds of supporters in the Azeri-populated towns of Kvemo Kartli in Azeri, Georgian, and Russian. This aspect of SaakashviliQs campaign contrasts with those of opposition candidates, who so far, have reached out more to Georgian Orthodox believers.

Levan Gachechiladze, United National Council of Opposition (UNC)

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¶7. (U) Levan Gachechiladze, presidential candidate for the United National Council of Opposition (UNC), is campaigning under the CEC-allotted number one -- which he says was "given to him by God, as a sign of victory." Gachechiladze's campaign symbol is a white tie, and white -- --"the color of purity" -- is the "colorQ of his campaign.

¶8. (U) Gachechiladze's campaigning under the slogan "Georgia in the First Place" -- an allusion to traditional Georgian values, and in direct opposition to Saakashvili's Qcosmopolitanism.Q Gachechiladze, permanently flanked by leaders of the nine parties which form the UNC, has focused his campaign in Tbilisi's "working class" districts including Isani, Samgori, Varketili and others, even though he is a majoritarian MP from the elite Vake district.

¶9. (SBU) Gachechiladze's public speeches are often brusque and he uses harsh language during campaign events, even resorting to cursing when speaking about Saakashvili. Gachechiladze has also been antagonistic toward media: even when asked general questions, he responds condescendingly to journalists. Gachechiladze also has had trouble articulating his position on various issues during his campaign. GachechiladzeQs fellow opposition leaders regularly threaten that if QSaakashvili dares to rig the elections," they, along with other opposition candidates will "stand together on January 6 to protect the Georgian people's votes."

¶10. (U) One of Gachechiladze's central messages to Tbilisi residents is that Georgia should no longer be the country of cheap workers and cheap products, but should become "a base for providing valuable products." He has also promised "a big amnesty" for inmates unjustly imprisoned. Gachechiladze has visited the wine-producing Kakheti region, emphasizing his business experience in wine-making and rapport with Kakheti farmers.

#### David Gamkrelidze -- New Rightists leader

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¶11. (SBU) Well-groomed and well-spoken, David Gamkrelidze contrasts with "less polished" Gachechiladze, and, as he points out himself, his "style is very different." However, Gamkrelidze's is not above aggressively attacking Saakashvili. Gamkrelidze's campaign is not marked by any particular symbolism, and in his current campaign speeches he has avoided any reference to the main symbol of his presidential platform -- the church. However, the theme of the Georgian Orthodox Church is almost always present, and Gamkrelidze is often shown on TV within various church settings. (Gamkrelidze's recent devoutness may raise an eyebrow of those who remember or know about his student activities within the soviet Komsomol structure)

¶12. (U) The more mundane issues of Gamkrelidze's campaign are improving the business environment and human rights. Both in Tbilisi and in the regions, Gamkrelidze stresses that if elected, he will liberate Georgian business from state interference, reduce taxes, and create barriers to low-quality imported goods in order to boost domestic production. Earlier, Gamkrelidze had underscored the inviolability of private property, but now his campaign is focused on fundamental human rights and freedoms. While visiting Irakli Batiashvili -- leader of the opposition movement Go Ahead Georgia imprisoned last year for giving intellectual support to a rebel local warlord in the Kodori Gorge -- Gamkrelidze made the point that Georgia does have prisoners of conscience.

¶13. (U) As a medical doctor by background, Gamkrelidze is especially campaigning with medical professionals and researchers. He has also reached out to narrower segments of society, including the Society of the Blind, offering an exemption of the land tax for members.

#### Shalva Natelashvili Q Labor Party leader

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¶14. (U) Shalva Natelashvili's campaign, focused primarily in Tbilisi, and usually presented against the background of red-and-blue Labor flags, is built on three platforms: the assertion that Saakashvili is a QterroristQ and QrobberQ of the Georgian people's assets; Natelashvili, as a victim of Saakashvili's regime; and extensive socialist promises to the Georgian people. Recently, Natelashvili in his campaign speeches has promised to provide free education, free medical service, exemption from electricity and natural gas bills, and to return bank deposits lost during the dissolution of the Soviet

Union. Natelashvili claims the financial burden of these initiatives will be carried by Georgian businesses, which in turn will receive significant tax privileges. The impression is that the Labor leader is competing against an unsubstantiated but widely circulated rumor that business tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili intends to pay the utility bills for all Georgians.

#### Gia Maisashvili Q the Party of the Future

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¶15. (U) Gia Maisashvili's campaign is the most modest so far. Limited to door-to-door campaigning and small meetings with students and academia, Maisashvili is promoting a knowledge-based society built on liberal values. When asked about the main feature of Maisashvili's campaign, one of his supporters, highlighted Qkindness.Q

#### Comment

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¶16. (SBU) The sense of the Georgian people is that Saakashvili's promises of social reform will disappear after the elections but the opposition candidates have offered few realistic alternatives to the voter. One essential feature uniting all of the candidate's platforms and campaign efforts is an uncertainty about the outcome. While Saakashvili's camp believes his victory is guaranteed, the opposition is similarly convinced of their ability to win enough votes in the first round to force a second round election (if the election is free and fair). The opposition has claimed a first round win by Saakashvili will likely have been orchestrated by the government. Without accurate polling, it is unclear how the election will go, but campaigning continues in an effort to swing the large group of undecided voters.

TEFFT